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A contract to build on

To those who have raised their torches and howled over what isn't in the new fire union contract, we have this to say: Rome wasn't built in a day.

The firefighters, to their credit, agreed to a fair number of concessions in this new contract. The movement may be small, but it's in the right direction. To begin with, Cranston firefighters now pay a co-share on health insurance.

Granted, the amount isn't significant – \$1,040 a year for families and \$520 a year for individuals, far less than the actual cost of providing health care – but it's a chink in the formerly impenetrable door of what the union perceived as its rightful due. From this point forward, co-shares are a normal part of life and the city is now in a position to start inching up the percentage its employees pay.

The elimination of retroactive pay is also a welcome element that Providence, which is approaching (if it hasn't already passed) four years without a contract, would kill to see in writing. When union contracts expire, it's traditional to apply the terms of the new contract to the time elapsed without a contract. On Sunday, however, the city started fresh with a new, three-year contract that outright ignored the last year spent in negotiations.

The new contract is also refreshingly void of any back-loading: reduced initial raises that get higher and higher, percentage-wise, with every passing year. After a six-month freeze on new raises (which gets the city through the first half of its current fiscal year, which also began July 1), the firefighters get 4 percent a year for the life of the contract, at 2 percent intervals every six months. The math is weird,

but the city does, in fact, save money under this system – not millions of dollars, but certainly at least tens (if not hundreds) of thousands over the life of the contract.

It's the position of the fire union that the delayed 4 percent raises work out to 3 percent a year when you factor in the gap year between contracts – an amount that matches what other city unions received during their recent negotiations. That may or may not be the case – there's an awful lot of unknowns to consider, including overtime, new hires and unexpected retirements.

But the core benefit of this contract is that it puts the city in a position to keep pecking away at health care costs while targeting "extras" such as longevity – a pay add-on that resembles the teachers' "step" increases. And it offers these benefits without extracting its proverbial pound of flesh; the changes that the fire union fought for and won include a lot of benefits for the families of firefighters killed in the line of duty (an increasingly rare occurrence) and some language that brings the contract roughly into line with state laws regarding firefighters diagnosed with cancer.

(The presumption that any form of cancer is occupational is somewhat far-fetched but, now that the state has seen fit to include a vaguely worded law to that effect on its books, it's up to the General Assembly to remove it.)

All in all, it's a good contract that offers a great foundation for future negotiations. Any arguments to the contrary are, for the most part, short-sighted, grasping after immediate gains at the expense of future benefit.